

Skier Profile

Joey Avellone – Fortune Favors the Bold

The old adage “*Once a Marine, always a Marine*” could never be truer than it is for Joseph “Joey” Avellone, who served as a rescue swimmer with a Tactically Remove American Personnel (TRAP) and Rescue Team. He was injured in Hawaii on March 31, 2001 when a fellow Marine fell into the surf and he dove in to help. Even though he knew the water was not deep and did a shallow-water dive, arching his back and kicking his feet to stall his momentum, Avellone hit a rock headfirst just under the surface of the water. As soon as his chin hit his chest, he felt his whole body go limp. He was under water about four and a half minutes before being pulled out. Though Avellone was conscious the whole time, he did not panic.

The 27-year-old veteran from Belleville, Ill. never gave up hope, and through the encouragement of his recreational therapist at the St. Louis VA Medical Center, Avellone began to understand the benefits of participating in wheelchair sports and adaptive recreational activities.

He played football and wrestled in high school and was an excellent swimmer, as evidenced by his Marine Corps assignment. Prior to his 1999 enlistment, Avellone raced motorcycles competitively. Today, he volunteers at the local wheelchair association’s “Enabling Mobility Center,” coaches little league football, is a peer counselor, serves as the sports director on the local Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) chapter board of directors, belongs to the American Legion, VFW and the Elks and is a motivational speaker for children.

A quadriplegic, Avellone not only challenges himself to a variety of summertime wheelchair sports but is also a regular participant at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic each year. Enjoying the event for the fifth consecutive year in 2005, Avellone participates in both Alpine and Nordic skiing, plays sled hockey, goes snowmobiling and rock climbing, and tends to be the life of the party when he charismatically sings karaoke at some of the evening activities, particularly “Great Balls of Fire.”

The mission of the Clinic is what draws Avellone back every year. “The Clinic offers disabled veterans a chance to do more adventurous things than most able-bodied people ever do,” he said. “You might not think you can do some of these athletic challenges, but you can. It’s not about competition – we are there to push ourselves to try new things and grow in confidence, cheering for each other.” To stay in top competitive shape, Avellone trains by swimming, lifting weights, and pushing himself in a manual wheelchair.

“*Fortes fortuna juvat*” – or “fortune favors the bold,” are Avellone’s watchwords. “Don’t be afraid of life and trying new things,” he advises others. By his own example, he clearly means what he says.

